

Spot the difference: the old Noddy (right) and the new (far right).

WHITEWASH FOR NODDY

Noddy goes to the censors – with the Blyton family's blessing

A 40-year-old with a turned-up nose, wearing a bell and big bows, might be viewed with some suspicion. Certainly Noddy is behaving strangely – or rather, his “minders” are. Macdonald, Noddy’s publisher, in conjunction with Enid Blyton’s two daughters, who control the author’s estate, decided the 100 million copies of Noddy stories sold to date did not reflect society’s concerns. The thing to do was take out the golliwogs (racist), the descriptions of girls as frightened or “sweet” (sexist), the spankings (too suggestive), and words like “gay” (meaning happy) and “queer” (meaning odd).

Macdonald claims, however, that it was under British pressure to clean up the Noddy books – although they won’t say how many letters of complaint were received. One suspects the pressure came mostly from within, because Noddy sales were on a steep decline.

Macdonald felt a radical “redevelopment” might attract attention. They have spent more than \$116,000 on publicity, to ensure the rumpus began on

cue in late September, 40 years since the little wooden man made by Old Man Carve in the woods escaped to Toyland on the back of Big Ears’ bicycle.

But if there were revolutionaries who wanted Noddy “modernised”, there seem to be as many counter-revolutionaries who are angry about the liberties taken and have proposed a Golliwog Preservation Society. Enid Blyton denied charges of racism and declared indignantly: “Golliwogs are merely lovable black toys, not Negroes.”

One is surprised that Blyton’s daughters were so obliging with Macdonald. Imogen Smallwood is the younger daughter, now 54.


She is also the hands-on manager of the Blyton office and argues she did only what their mother would have done, which was “to abide by the advice of her publisher”.

But, in fact, when pressed, Imogen will admit that some of the rewriting was too creative (for instance, her mother had described smoke with a variety of verbs, including “belching”, but Macdonald had ironed these all out, so that the smoke was only allowed to “pour”). She does not know whether her “requests” to reinstate some words have been observed, because the first 12 titles

are just now appearing, and the second 12 will be published in March, 1991. The point is that she didn’t have to make “requests” – she holds the copyright – but she looks abashed when I point this out. “No, I’m not going to make a row about this – no, really I’m not.”

The original Harmsen Van der Beek illustrations, to which Macdonald obtained the copyright after the artist’s death, have been redrawn by Mary Cooper – Toytown has fewer blondes and a more ethnically mixed population.

The teacher in “Noddy Goes to School”, Miss Rap, becomes Miss Prim. She is no longer allowed to spank the children – the slipper that hung by the blackboard has been redrawn as a feather duster. And to distribute the roles in the books more equally between the sexes, some of the boy toys have had sex changes: Gilbert Golly becomes Martha Monkey, for example, and a male judge becomes a female judge.

Is this the best of all possible worlds – a little wooden man in a sanitised society where the old fairytale stereotypes no longer apply? Will Noddy be revised again one day, when people with red noses and big ears object to a character being called Big Ears? 

– CAROLINE BING

